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ABSTRACT

Good language teachers do not frighten students away by overwhelming them with the target language, but take pains to create student confidence in their ability to speak the language, beginning in the first class period. They present the language in such a way that students can interact with it immediately. This may mean that teachers must talk more slowly than they would prefer, use cognates, and employ constructions reflecting a slightly Americanized syntax of the target language. Teachers might also try techniques such as kinesics, some written instructions (in English when necessary), and a list of useful expressions. Students with difficulty in pronunciation can be assisted by writing out their pronunciation questions, and the answers they derive, in the target language. If teachers put the language at the students' disposal immediately, student motivation, and even enrollments, may improve dramatically. (MSE)

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The First Days of Class

by Gerald S. Giauque

Too many of today's language teachers either speak the language in class too much or else not enough. Those who do not speak it enough are often guilty of not knowing the language well enough themselves, and so they hesitate to use it. The result is serious; the students never hear the spoken language. But what is more serious, the class soon becomes a pseudo-language class. The students soon realize that the class never will really come to the point where the language will be used for meaningful communication. If, later in the year, the teacher should make an effort to require more use of the spoken language in the classroom, there is usually a great deal of resistence, since the habit of speaking English has been established. The teacher soon decides that it is much easier to go back to the "grammar method" of teaching foreign languages, than it is to constantly nag the students about using the language in class.

On the other hand, those teachers who speak the language natively or who were highly motivated language students themselves, often never speak one word of English in the classroom. This often produces the disastrous result of frightening away several students. Usually such teachers have the philosphy that they should speak the language with the same speed and degree of sophistication that they would use if they were speaking to another native speaker. In most cases, this means that the teacher speaks too fast for the students to understand, even if they have already studied phonetics, grammar

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and vocabulary a great deal. The students believe that what they consider to be nearly impossible will be required of them, and that they are being asked to reach an unattainable goal.

A superior language teacher is very wise; he understands that he cannot afford to frighten away the students by overwhelming them with the target language; but he also understands how immensely important it is that the students understand the general objective of the course: to learn to speak the language. Such a teacher takes great pains to create in the students a high degree of confidence in their ability to learn to speak the language, beginning in the first class period and continuing throughout the year. In order to instill in students a positive attitude towards the target language, the teacher must get to the language as soon as possible and in such a way that THE STUDENTS MAY INTERACT WITH IT IMMEDIATELY. This means that he must talk less than he may want to talk, slow down if necessary, and use cognates and constructions which may reflect a slightly americanized syntax of the target language: "il est nécessaire," instead of "il faut;" "es necesario" for "hay que," etc. It will be possible to help the student substitute "il faut" for "il est nécessaire" at a later date. The most important thing to do during the first few weeks is to re-inforce as much as possible the student's self-confidence with regard to his ability to learn the language.

The student must come to understand the teacher's speech as soon as possible; this means that he must be able to recognize the sounds his teacher makes and understand them, particularly the

cognates, within the first two or three class hours. Kinesics may be helpful during the first two hours; pointing to himself, the teacher says, "je" "yo," "ich"; pointing to the group, he says, "vous," "Ustedes," "sie." He introduces verbs the same way: "manger, fumer, dormir, écrire, écouter, comer, fumar, escribir, escuchar," etc. Longer communications in which more detailed instructions must be given can be communicated through material written on the board or distributed on mimeographed sheets. This material may be written in English or, in the second and third year classes, some or all of this material may be in the target language. This, above all else, helps the student understand that the target language is REAL, and is intended to be used.

The teacher and one or two carefully chosen student assistants should do all they can to help the student express himself. The students first expressions might very well be "oui" and "non", "si," "no," "ja" and "nein.", and he should be encouraged to speak them often. If the teacher will carefully think about the words he uses, he will find that he can use cognates and kinesics a great deal of the time as he discusses the principles of pronunciation and later, grammar: "répétez, prononcez, écrivez," etc. A list of useful expressions especially suited to the classroom might be distributed and learned so that the teacher may use the target language to call the class to order, call roll, have the class prepare for a quiz, or any number of other routine activities. Another list containing expressions from the target language that have been adopted into English might be distributed, to show the contributions the target

language has made to English. The principle of cognates should be made very clear to students, many of whom have no idea of the relationship of English to other western Eurepean tongues as they begin their language study. Most of all, translation of cognates from the foreign language into English should never be allowed; rather, students should be encouraged to translate cognates from English into the foreign language. The teacher should emphasize that pronunciation, rather than grammar or vocabulary, is one of the principle differences between the target language and English, and that once the principles of pronunciation are learned, the student will be able to recognize and understand a great deal of what he hears in the target language. "Do you understand?" the teacher should say in the target language, often. The students should respond in the language, "Yes." "No." If the students do not understand, then further explanation should be given, but the students should first have an opportunity to try to figure out what the foreign expression is before they are given the answer.

If a student has difficulty with pronunciation, he should write out answers to study questions on pronunciation. such as "Est-ce que le 'i' français rime généralement avec le 'i' anglais ou le 'ee' anglais?" Se pronuncia la 'h' en español? "Wie spricht man aus der 's' auf Deutsch? Wie Englisch 's' oder 'z?' If he has a problem with basic grammar, he should be guided to discover inductively, the answers to his questions on grammar. But the person who helps him should do little talking; rather he should listen intently to what the student tries to do. He should encourage him to develop his self-confidence; as

long as the teacher or assistant does most of the work, often the student will not take the initiative to learn the material, and above all, will not use it. But if the teacher or assistant, when working with that student on an individual basis, tells the student (1) that he is interested in him (and demonstrates this by his intentness) and (2) demonstrates confidence that he will indeed learn, the student will generally respond.

The first few days and weeks of a foreign language class are critical. The teacher may create a island of the countries whose language he teaches, or may betray his charge. Many students are fascinated by the thought of being able to communicate in a medium other than English and they hunger for that almost "secret and magical power." If we put the language at their disposition right from the beginning, we may find our enrollments bursting within a couple of years.

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